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## **Suicidal Rage: An Analysis of Hardcore Punk Lyrics**

**James R. McDonald**

While the popular music phenomenon of punk rock has been in existence for over a decade, the critical attention devoted to it has largely been confined to examinations of the social or political ramifications of the punk aesthetic. Little commentary, however, has been devoted to the message of punk songwriters. This paper focuses specifically on a branch of the punk movement which has become known as hardcore. More importantly, it examines the lyrics of several hardcore punk bands, explaining thematic trends which clarify more specifically the intended impact of hardcore punk participants. Finally, the paper argues that the verbal message of punk lyrics deserve even more extensive analysis than has heretofore been granted.

Fully ten years after its inception in 1975, punk rock still captures the imagination of young people today. Predictions by critics that punk rock would die a death similar to that of disco have been largely incorrect. London, for instance, writing in 1984, suggested that punk rock "doesn't have the following necessary to sustain itself" (167). On the other hand, critics like Morthland, writing in 1985 have been more accurate by suggesting that "these bands may work on a much more modest scale, but they're all in it for the long haul" (78). While the early forerunners of punk rock such as The Sex Pistols, The Ramones, and the Clash have all either disbanded or reached a stage of commercial acceptance, newer groups, under the name of hardcore punk, have taken up the banner of punk revolution adopted by the original groups in Britain and America. Created as part of a reaction against late 70s highly commercialized arena rock, hardcore punk was not built to last. Nevertheless, through groups like The Vandals, Suicidal Tendencies, M.D.C., Fang, The F.U.'S, The White Lie, Black Flag, The Cramps, Husker Du, and Flipper, it has not only survived, but increased in popularity.

*History of the Punk Movement*

Prior to documenting the emergence of hardcore punk and analyzing the lyrics of representative groups, a brief social and cultural history of the punk movement is appropriate.

Originating almost simultaneously in Britain and America in 1975, punk rock was largely a media creation, particularly due to the notoriety of The Sex Pistols. The Sex Pistols were organized by Malcolm McLaren, a boutique owner in Chelsea and a former art student. The group gained its original image in 1976 by using obscene language on a live television talk show. Two number one hits quickly followed in 1977: "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen." After originally being turned down for work visas, the band was granted permission to tour America in early 1978. Attended by a large media blitz, the tour was burdened by violence and further negative publicity and the band eventually split up at the end of the tour. The rise of The Sex Pistols in England was pretty much paralleled in America by the emergence of a punk scene in New York, particularly through the band, The Ramones, who released six albums between 1976 and 1980. The punk scene kept pace in England, largely through the punk group, The Clash, who released their first album, "The Clash," in the spring of 1977 and "London Calling" in the late 70s. The Clash, however, unlike the hardcore punk groups that have followed, were able to sell their records in large numbers, their first release selling over 100,000 copies. By comparison, a hardcore punk album reaching 25,000 in sales is considered a success. By 1980, The Clash, along with other punk originators such as The Pretenders, Talking Heads, Blondie, and others, had reached commercial acceptance and were no longer classified as punk groups, but rather, as new wave acts.

#### *Punk's Cultural Significance*

More important than the history of punk rock, however, is an assessment of its cultural significance. That significance has seen a debate of limited proportions, especially with regard to the degree of political impact punk music has delivered. All popular music, as part of the culture of young people, has some political impact, but Marcus suggests that "punk was the first such movement to direct its rage where it belonged: against those in power" (453). That statement, when considered against much of the music directed against Nixon in the late 60s and early 70s, is overstated. Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement with Marcus that punk rock has a political basis as its primary creative impulse. Frith, for instance, writes that punk singers "focused their lyrics on social and political subjects" (160), while Morthland suggests that punk rock "is a grass-roots movement, and a political challenge to the existing order in government as well as in music" (68).

Perhaps more accurate, however, is Goldberg's comment that "the common thread that continues to run through punk is a dissatisfaction with the modern world. How that frustration is articulated varies greatly" (30). This variety in how the punk message is delivered has contributed to the disagreement as to how political the punk movement has been. One critic, in particular, believes that punk groups are apolitical.

In an article assessing the impact which rock critics had on reporting and, he asserts, in totally creating the punk movement, Tillman argues that punk rock is less political and more theatrical as a media form:

Anarchy for punks is not so much political protest as it is artistic, or aesthetic rebellion against controls which are not economically or politically motivated but rather are normative in origin. (170)

Punk fashions—torn tee shirts and dyed hair—are not simply reflections of a dissident punk culture, they are punk culture. Similarly, when punks invoke political symbols such as swastikas or songs about 'anarchy,' they are not taking a political stance, but rather, are making a statement about the idea of politics: its irrelevance. (171)

In summary, Tillman's argument is that rock critics, through their tendency to find counter-cultural manifestations in any new musical development, build a scenario for the politicizing of rock music which, he argues, simply does not exist. He further suggests that rock critics, because of their initial enthusiasm for the punk movement, led not only the public, but the punk movement itself, to believe that the political stance seemingly created by punk rockers was what the punk movement was all about and that the punk audience came to expect such a stance. In light of many of the punk rockers' disclaimers that they were political, Tillman's objections are certainly viable. His summary statement, however, like the Marcus quote cited earlier, again seems to be overstated: "It is possible, and I feel likely, that rock music is inherently apolitical and that attempts to fuse the two realms will inevitably fail; rock may simply be too sensual and aesthetic and lacks the purposive-rational orientation that is required to realistically engage in political action" (173).

By using the word "action," however, Tillman falls victim to the same criteria he has used to criticize other critics. Punk rock is not about action, but is commentary articulated by means of parody. The error seems to be in asserting that any politically articulated statement must result in a corresponding action. As a result, Tillman's summation is very similar in tone to Marcus' lament that "punk rock was an aesthetic and political revolt based in a mass of contradictions that sustained it aesthetically and doomed it politically" (451). Whether hardcore punk lyrics are also apolitical, as Tillman asserts about punk music, and have

doomed the music politically, as Marcus asserts, will be addressed later in this analysis.

#### *The Aesthetic Aspect of Punk*

What rock critics are in agreement upon regarding punk rock are the aesthetic aspects of the musical revolt itself. Punk rockers sought, as Frith writes, "to undermine the populist assumptions of transparency and subcultural identity, to mock the idea of a direct line from social experience to musical form, to expose the subjective claims deeply embedded in all rock music" (160). Specifically, punk rock sought to denounce multinational record companies by recording with small, independent companies, and secondly, punk rock sought to deliver the message that anyone could play the music. Punk rock emerged, then, from areas where youths either decided that they could not adapt to society, or where society could not adapt to them. As a result, the music evolved in either working-class neighborhoods, or, in the case of hardcore punk beginning about 1980, in suburban neighborhoods. The forerunners of the entire scene were labeled garage bands in the 60s and 70s, a musical development which has been adequately discussed by Lester Bangs and Garry Burns.

A final aesthetic aspect of the punk movement is the parody component of the lyric content itself, or, what Tillman refers to as punk's theatrics: "Punks go beyond traditionally defined delinquency and, in a sense, become 'ultra delinquents'; their violations are not so much illegal as they are attacks on style and form. The punk stance seems often to be a parody of the delinquent—a fantasy of ultimate delinquency with mock violence, masochism and theatrical displays of costumes and manners which represent a break with not only the 'straight' culture but with traditional delinquency as well" (170). One could argue, however, that while the music, actions, and dress-code of the punk scene are theatrical, the lyric content of the songs is less parody and more serious than critics have heretofore considered.

#### *Critical Commentary on Punk*

The absence of serious comment on punk lyrics is mostly due to the tendency of critics to concentrate on the punk philosophy or the punk persona. From the very beginning, critics have focused on the punk image—the punk style of dress, the punk style of dancing, or the frenetic style of punk music. Occasionally, critics concentrate on the artistic aspects of the punk credo, as in Henry's article, "Punk and Avante-Garde Art." More prevalent, however, are articles on the punk club scene, such as Latham's examination of underground clubs in Los Angeles.

The obvious omission in the attention devoted to punk rock is that of the lyrics to the songs. For instance, in Boston's *Punk Rock*, the only extensive comment on lyrics in the entire book is in Ian Rakoff's Introduction where he briefly states, "Whether political or not, the immediate relevance of their lyrics is marked with extraordinary lucidity" (12). The same neglect of punk lyrics can be found in Anscombe's and Blair's *Punk*. And Tobler's *Punk Rock*, while the earliest study of this popular phenomenon, concentrates on the social impact of the earliest British groups and offers little insight into the lyrics. Most comments on the lyrics are cryptic at best, an example of which is Henry's comment that punk involved "screamed lyrics which were largely unintelligible though important anthems to the punk cause" (31).

Because the lyrics to punk rock songs are rarely printed with album releases and are often difficult to decipher and transcribe, most recent critics, with the exception of Frith, have simply ignored the lyric content. Frith, arguing that pop songs "celebrate not the articulate but the 'inarticulate,' comes to the conclusion that 'the message of punk lyrics comes simply from the odd words that stick out of the noisy chorus—the punk sound was a variation on a short hard assertion: 'won't/want'" (35-36). Frith goes on to suggest that punk lyrics are "constructed around simple syllables" (159) which, when one listens to the songs, may seem logical because the delivery is extremely rapid, making it difficult for the vocalist to enunciate polysyllabic words.

Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of hardcore punk lyrics which go beyond the "simple syllable" framework Frith suggests. Moreover, Frith's use of past tense in the first quote further emphasizes the failure of critics to fully realize the permanence of the punk movement. More importantly, Frith's and most critics' tendency to focus on the social and political aspects of the punk scene, while largely ignoring the lyric content, reveals the glaring deficiency in scholarship on this aspect of popular music.

An analysis of lyrics by representative hardcore punk groups illustrates that the lyric content goes beyond the "won't/want" scheme Frith offers. Such an analysis serves to suggest the goals and ideas of hardcore punk lyricists. The lyrics of hardcore punk are more than simply monosyllabic words used to augment a hard, up-tempo beat, and have meaning heretofore best known to the groups' respective fans. For the purpose of this analysis, songs released in 1984 and 1985 from the following hardcore groups are used: Suicidal Tendencies, The Vandals, The F.U.'S., Fang, M.D.C., and The White Lie.

#### *Definition of Hardcore Punk*

At the outset, a definition of hardcore punk is necessary. A style of punk music, hardcore is, as its name implies, hard in that it does not vary from the core of rock—that is, hardcore disavows commercialism, synthetic technological effect such as synthesizers, etc., the recording industry itself, and anything similar to the characteristics of mainstream rock. Albums are released in small numbers and are produced by very low-budget record companies. Morthland indicates that most hardcore albums cost less than \$6,000 to record and most releases make a profit (124). The basic concept is that anyone can play, the tempo is always very fast, approaching a hectic, monotonous pounding with little variation, and most importantly, the lyrics are not sung, but normally shouted, groaned or spoken—often by the audience in a concert setting as much as by the singer of a group. There exists, then none of the smooth vocal harmonies apparent in mainstream rock. The positioning of the hardcore vocalist is that the leader of a mob—he/she must shout to be heard. This vocal intensity is transmitted on hardcore albums and accounts for the difficulty in transcribing the lyrics.

#### *Lyric Analysis of "Suicidal Tendencies"*

As they proudly proclaim on their newest album called "Suicidal Tendencies" (Frontier Records, 1011, 1984), the band Suicidal Tendencies was voted "worst band and biggest assholes in Flipside '82 polls." Originating from Play Del Rey, California, the band's album includes 12 songs: "Memories of Tomorrow," "Possessed," "I Saw Your Mommy," "Fascist Pig," "I Want More," "Suicidal Failure," "Suicide's An Alternative," "Two-Sided Politics," "I Shot Reagan," "Subliminal," "Won't Fall In Love Again," and "Institutionalized." As evidenced by the song titles, all written by Suicidal Tendencies' vocalist Mike Muir, the songs are atypical from those of mainstream rock groups such as Journey and REO Speedwagon. All are highly political in content and only one song, "Won't Fall In Love Again," deals with love and it is set in the negative. Moreover, all 12 songs are written in 1st person and there is no effort to establish a neutral persona of any kind. Finally, each song appears to be personally motivated and several adopt the structure of a dramatic monologue.

Perhaps the best example of the dramatic monologue characteristic of hardcore lyrics is the last track on the album—"Institutionalized." Using a long spoken introduction, Muir describes problems he has relating to society and the efforts of friends to help him "take it out." He then explains how his parents accuse him of being on drugs and acting crazy—so they want him to go to an institution to solve his problems. Reacting violently to this suggestion, Muir screams out the final lyrics to the song: "They say they're gonna fix my brain/Alleviate my suffering and my pain/But by the time they fix my head/Mentally

I'll be dead." As the guitar chords fade away, Muir says, "It doesn't matter, 'cause I'll probably get hit by a car anyway." Such a fatalistic comment is typical of the hardcore punk attitude. The entire concept of this song, in addition to the other tracks on the album, is that youth today do not have any control over their own individuality.

### *The Hardcore Theme of Rage*

While Frith's comment that punk lyrics express a "won't/want" demand points to this common theme within many hardcore punk groups, it neglects to explain how and why that theme has originated. The lyrics of hardcore punk go beyond expressing denial of the system as youth encounter it; rather, they express rage at the system, a total inability to change it, and no desire to participate in it or any of its conventions. The rage is often expressed in suicidal terms, as in the following examples: "Sick of politics—for the rich/Sick and tired—and no one cares/Sick of living—it sucks" ("Suicide's An Alternative"); "Mass starvation/Contaminated water/Destroyed cities/Mutilated bodies/I'll kill myself/I'd rather die/If you could see in the future/You'd know why: (Memories of Tomorrow)". Both examples typify the punk attitude and both indicate that the futility is not confined to one central societal issue, but involve numerous issues. The latter example also illustrates that not all hardcore songs use simple syllables, as do the following lyrics from "Institutionalized": "They stuck me in an institution/Said it was the only solution/To give me the needed professional help/To protect me from the enemy, myself."

The negative nature of Suicidal Tendencies' songs is certainly politically motivated, but that motivation is also very personal, representing a class of people—young, unemployed (or, as Muir writes, unwilling to work at the "golden arches"—McDonalds—for minimum wage), and taking refuge in a common bond, in this case rejection of life and possible consideration of suicide. The suicide theme appears six times in the 12 songs on this album. The political issues include lyrics about nuclear war, riot squads, teenage unemployment, violation of freedom of expression, subliminal propaganda "sponsored by the CIA," mental institutions, and teenage suicide.

Perhaps the most vivid example of hardcore punk's rage, however, is in the lyrics to "I Saw Your Mommy." Written again in 1st person, Muir describes finding a corpse lying brutalized in the gutter of a street. Concentrating on visual details, he writes, "I took a picture cause I thought it was neat/But the thing I like seeing the best/Was the rodents using her hair as a nest." After the refrain of "I saw your mommy and your mommy's dead," Muir adds, "I hope she dies twenty times more." Apparently a violent reaction to any type of authority figure, in this case parental authority, the lyrics to this song typify the extent that

hardcore punk groups have gone to in order to make their point: the world as it exists today has no meaning to them whatsoever. The expressions of rage, inability to relate, desire to be left alone or to die, are all screamed at fast pace, so fast that it is difficult to understand the words even when one has finally transcribed the lyrics and reads along while listening. The speed of the singer's delivery parallels the frantic disgust felt by the band's members, and indeed is an essential component of that rage: it is as if the vocalist cannot state his/her position fast enough—or the band won't permit it.

*Lyric Analysis of "The Vandals"*

The latest album release from The Vandals demonstrates several of the same characteristics as in that of Suicidal Tendencies, although their album, "When In Rome, Do As The Vandals" (National Trust Records, 1984), is not quite as political as "Suicidal Tendencies," preferring to poke fun at mainstream music rather than tackle as many socio-political issues. Also a southern California based group, The Vandal's songs include "Slap of Love," "Ladykiller," "Bad Birthday Bash," "Master Race (in outer space)," "Big Brother vs. Johnny Sake," "Mohawk Town," "Viking Suit," "It's Not Unusual," "I'm a Fly," "Airstream," and "Rico." "Ladykiller," "Bad Birthday Bash," "Airstream," and "Rico" all deal with the joys of playing punk music while deriding mainstream rock and deserve no further treatment here. In addition, "It's Not Unusual," an instrumental, and "Mohawk Town," a clever country western parody, are merely throw-off songs.

However, in three songs, "Slap of Love," "Viking Suit," and "I'm a Fly," The Vandals echo the concerns demonstrated in the songs of Suicidal Tendencies and, to some extent, demonstrate a social concern which rock critics have failed to notice in hardcore punk music.

"Slap of Love," on the surface, is a song which many would find offensive. Dealing with the subject of physical abuse of women, there is some question as to whether The Vandals are advocating such abuse or making fun of it. The song begins with a dialogue between a man and a woman: "Do you love me baby?/Yes/Well how much do you love me?/Mmm, a whole bunch/Well, how much is a whole bunch?/Well, I don't know/This much? Smack!/Ohhhh!" Physical slaps are accentuated throughout the song through rim shots by the band's drummer. Using the following chorus to make its point, "And if she talks back/You'll just have to slap her down/Give her that slappin' love/It keeps her comin around," the song appears to condone the notion of physical abuse of women. When one arrives at the final stanza, however, there is a touch of sarcastic irony: "And now you're looking at the rings on your hand/And you're feeling like a hell of a man/Your woman now knows her place/I can see it on her rosy face."

I teach an English literature course on rock lyrics, and when this song was played it provoked considerable debate amongst the males and females. The females, quite logically, were aghast at the treatment of women in the song, while the males felt that The Vandals were having fun with the entire subject and were not condoning the abuse of women. While no final conclusion can be drawn with any certainty, it is clear that The Vandals are at least capable of addressing subjects with an eye to provoking discussion, something which many mainstream rock groups have long avoided.

The next song, "Viking Suit," deals with the subject of child pornography. The song begins with a nasal voice saying, "Come here little boy/I'm a friend of your mother/Get in the car/I'll give you a candy bar if you get in the car/Okay?" The song then recounts the story of a photographer with a desire to be Leif Ericson who takes young boys walking home from school, dresses them in viking suits, and photographs them in pornographic poses. As in "Slap of Love," The Vandals address contemporary subjects directly, but, in this case, there is no doubt that the song is delivered as a warning, not a credo.

The final song, "I'm A Fly," echoes Suicidal Tendencies' preoccupation with teenage suicide, while at the same time reinforcing the hardcore punk abhorrence of the modern world. Delivered at the usual fast pace, the key lines in the song are as follows: "This world of shit I land on/It's got nothing to give/I don't wanna live/I don't wanna live." The emphasis on suicide in this song, and on several of those of Suicidal Tendencies, rather than a realistic desire, appears to be strong disgust registered as fantasy. Instead of being able to change the world, or adapt to it, hardcore punk artists dream of starting over, as the following lyrics from Suicidal Tendencies' "Suicidal Failure" clearly indicate: "Death may not be the answer, it can't be all that great/But me I'm not living, with life I can't relate/By some masochistic reasoning, I think that it will be fun/I want to start my second life now/So shoot me with your gun." This song suggests not necessarily a fatalistic position, but one of frustration with a phoenix-like urge to try again.

#### *Lyric Analysis of "The F.U.'S"*

The idea of frustration is continued in the latest release from another Los Angeles based hardcore punk group, The F.U.'S. Their album, "Do We Really Want To Hurt You?" (Gasatanka Records, Enigma, E-1109, 1985), addresses many of the same issues already explored in the work of Suicidal Tendencies and The Vandals. Several of their songs, however, particularly "Warlords," "Rock the Nation," "Lick My Shiny Boots," and "Promised Land," address the issue of the hardcore punk movement itself.

"Warlords" establishes a post-nuclear holocaust society where the punkers, as they refer to themselves, take over the world: "Five years ago you were safe with your TV/ Never even though what your future might be/ Now you're a packrat, pickin' through the rubble/ Sacred of your own shadow, tryin' to hide from the trouble/ Where is that comfort to which you were devoted/ Weren't you surprised when your world exploded?/ Your hiding days are over—Now that we've found you/ Resist or surrender, doesn't matter—We'll destroy you!"

The next song, "Rock the Nation," more specifically addresses the fact that hardcore punk lyricists really do not care about their reception as artists, nor about who is listening: "Ten years of lecturing are ringing in my head/ At this point I don't need you to tell me what's stupid/ We believe in what we say and that's all that matters/ ...Carve out a little freedom grab us a little fun/ Don't need to justify it—Don't need a reason."

Yet at the same time that hardcore punk artists suggest that their freedom of expression is all that matters to them, the issue of boredom with the modern world resurfaces again in the opening lyrics to "Lick My Shiny Boots" "Sixties set us all free/ Now what do you think about that?/ Yeah, everybody's happy/ and we're all soft and fat/ Here comes the Eighties/ Brand New Age/ Holy Cow! Woweel/ Freedom sure is boring/ Looks like the Seventies to me."

In typical hardcore punk fashion, however, the political issue of nuclear war continues to haunt this particular musical generation, obliterating any sense of real freedom which they feel they have. "Promised Land," a frightening vision of post-nuclear war similar to that developed in "Warlords," is much more graphic in its use of language: "Nobody can remember who started the war/ I hope they were rewarded with a mutated whore." The song continues with an angry description of the mutations the F.U.'S envision: "So this is the wave of the future/ Let's hurry up and go/ There's no need for lights/ When your nipples glow/ There is no need for beverages/ there is no need for Schlitz/ Just open up your anus/ and suck out all your shits." This last example, possibly the most graphic set of lyrics this writer has discovered by a hardcore punk band, clearly indicates the intensity with which many of these groups attempt to deal with political issues, particularly the issue of impending nuclear destruction.

#### *Other Hardcore Themes*

Other issues addressed by hardcore punk groups include the following: religion, illustrated by Fang's "They Sent Me To Hell C.O.D."—"They singled me out like they once did to Christ/ I said if religion's so great, why does it come with a price"; El Salvador, illustrated by M.D.C.'s "(R)evolution In Rock"—"We think it's right you call it

left/Vietnam to El Salvador, you just play deaf/You don't want to hear a word we say/Wanna make believe it's all okay"; and finally, genocide, illustrated by The White Lie's "postcard From Dachau"—"So I bought a healthy pile/Of assorted types of gore: Corpses, piles of hoes—I knew who they were for/And to the corporations/Who act like Hitlers now/I mailed them all from Munich/With Love, from Dachau." Clearly hardcore punk lyrics, while often similar in content and approach, are, nevertheless, diverse in the issues they address.

### *Suggestions for Further Study*

These diverse expressions of outrage, hate and futility have often been labeled mere posturing by some critics. London, for instance, suggests that "the power of its [punk's] message is its lack of message" (151). That attitude merely overlooks or ignores the message, or at least calls attention to the fact that the message has not been carefully examined. Orman is more attuned to the reality of message impact in punk lyrics when he suggests that "the politics of rock music in the 1980s...is virtually dead except that generated by the Grateful Dead and punk rock/new wave groups" (79). Given the illustrations offered within this analysis of hardcore punk lyrics, the claims that those lyrics are apolitical seems without merit.

With a few exceptions such as Bruce Springsteen, Don Henley, Bruce Cockburn, Jackson Browne, U2, etc., mainstream rock groups have largely abandoned political issues and returned to the love themes so prevalent in the music of the 50s. Not so, however, with hardcore punk rock. Groups such as those discussed here are writing lyrics with a hard, visual strength, a strength which is perhaps shocking, but which is, nevertheless, effective. It is important to begin paying closer attention to those lyrics—the verbal message offered through hardcore punk music—and less attention to the visual image so often concentrated upon. Clearly, hardcore punk lyrics are not simply monosyllabic statements with little or no meaning, but frantic shouts of concern about crucial social and political issues which deserve to be heard and evaluated by critics in a much more analytical fashion than they have been granted thus far.

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